Making the World Safe for Hypocrisy

by Michael Parenti

from the book Dirty Truths

Why has the United States government supported counterinsurgency in Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador, and many other places around the world, at such a loss of human life to the populations of those nations? Why did it invade tiny Grenada and then Panama? Why did it support mercenary wars against progressive governments in Nicaragua, Mozambique, Angola, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Indonesia, East Timor, Western Sahara, South Yemen, and elsewhere? Is it because our leaders want to save democracy? Are they concerned about the well-being of these defenseless peoples? Is our national security threatened? I shall try to show that the arguments given to justify U.S. policies are false ones. But this does not mean the policies themselves are senseless. American intervention may seem "wrongheaded" but, in fact, it is fairly consistent and horribly successful.

The history of the United States has been one of territorial and economic expansionism, with the benefits going mostly to the U.S. business class in the form of growing investments and markets, access to rich natural resources and cheap labor, and the accumulation of enormous profits. The American people have had to pay the costs of empire, supporting a huge military establishment with their taxes, while suffering the loss of jobs, the neglect of domestic services, and the loss of tens of thousands of American lives in overseas military ventures.

The greatest costs, of course, have been borne by the peoples of the Third World who have endured poverty, pillage, disease, dispossession, exploitation, illiteracy, and the widespread destruction of their lands, cultures, and lives.

As a relative latecomer to the practice of colonialism, the United States could not match the older European powers in the acquisition of overseas territories. But the United States was the earliest and most consummate practitioner of neoimperialism or neocolonialism,

the process of dominating the politico-economic life of a nation without benefit of direct possession. Almost half a century before the British thought to give a colonized land its nominal independence, as in India-while continuing to exploit its labor and resources, and dominate its markets and trade-the United States had perfected this practice in Cuba and elsewhere.

In places like the Philippines, Haiti, and Nicaragua, and when dealing with Native American nations, U.S. imperialism proved itself as brutal as the French in Indochina, the Belgians in the Congo, the Spaniards in South America, the Portuguese in Angola, the Italians in Libya, the Germans in Southwest Africa, and the British almost everywhere else. Not long ago, U.S. military forces delivered a destruction upon Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia that surpassed anything perpetuated by the older colonizers. And today, the U.S. counterinsurgency apparatus and surrogate security forces in Latin America and elsewhere sustain a system of political assassination, torture, and repression unequaled in technological sophistication and ruthlessness.

All this is common knowledge to progressive critics of U.S policy, but most Americans would be astonished to hear of it. They have been taught that, unlike other nations, their country has escaped the sins of empire and has been a champion of peace and justice among nations. This enormous gap between what the United States does in the world and what Americans think their nation is doing is one of the great propaganda accomplishments of the dominant political mythology. It should be noted, though, that despite the endless propaganda barrage emanating from official sources and the corporate-owned major media, large sectors of the public have throughout U.S. history displayed an anti-interventionist sentiment, an unwillingness to commit U.S. troops to overseas actions-a sentiment facilely labeled "isolationism" by the interventionists.

The Rational Function of Policy Myths

Within U.S. ruling circles there are differences of opinion regarding interventionist policy. There are conservatives who complain that U.S. policy is plagued by weakness and lacks toughness and guts and all the other John Wayne virtues. And there are liberals who say U.S. policy is foolish and relies too heavily on military solutions and should be more flexible and co-optive when protecting and advancing the interests of the United States (with such interests usually left unspecified).

A closer look reveals that U.S. foreign policy is neither weak nor foolish, but on the contrary is rational and remarkably successful in reproducing the conditions for the continued international expropriation of wealth, and that while it has suffered occasional setbacks, the people who run the foreign policy establishment in Washington know what they are doing and why they are doing it.

If the mythology they offer as justification for their policies seems irrational, this does not mean that the policies themselves are irrational from the standpoint of the class interests of those who pursue such policies. This is true of domestic myths and policies as well as those pertaining to foreign policy. Once we grasp this, we can see how notions and arrangements that are harmful, wasteful, indeed, destructive of human and social values-and irrational from a human and social viewpoint-are not irrational for global finance capital because the latter has no dedication to human and social values. Capitalism has no loyalty to anything but itself, to the accumulation of wealth. Once we understand that, we can see the cruel rationality of the seemingly irrational myths that

Washington policy makers peddle. Some times what we see as irrational is really the discrepancy between what the myth wants us to believe and what is true. But again this does not mean the interests served are stupid or irrational, as the liberals like to complain. There is a difference between confusion and deception, a difference between stupidity and subterfuge. Once we understand the underlying class interests of the ruling circles, we will be less mystified by their myths.

A myth is not an idle tale or a fanciful story but a powerful cultural force used to legitimate existing social relations. The interventionist mythology does just that, by emphasizing a community of interests between interventionists in Washington and the American people when in fact there is none, and by blurring over the question of who pays and who profits from U.S. global interventionism.

The mythology has been with us for so long and much of it sufficiently internalized by the public as to be considered part of the political culture. The interventionist mythology, like all other cultural beliefs, does not just float about in space. It must be mediated through a social structure. The national media play a crucial role in making sure that no fundamentally critical views of the rationales underlying and justifying U.S. policy gain national exposure. A similar role is played by the various institutes and policy centers linked to academia and, of course, by political lead ers themselves.

Saving Democracy with Tyranny

Our leaders would have us believe we intervened in Nicaragua, for instance, because the Sandinista government was opposed to democracy. The U.S.-supported invasion by right-wing Nicaraguan mercenaries was an "effort to bring them to elections." Putting aside the fact that the Sandinistas had already conducted fair and open elections in 1984, we might wonder why U.S. leaders voiced no such urgent demand for free elections and Western-style parliamentarism during the fifty years that the Somoza dictatorship-installed and supported by the United States-plundered and brutalized the Nicaraguan nation. Nor today does Washington show any great concern for democracy in any of the U.S.-backed dictatorships around the world (unless one believes that the electoral charade in a country like El Salvador qualifies as "democracy").

If anything, successive U.S. administrations have worked hard to subvert constitutional and popularly accepted governments that pursued policies of social reform favorable to the downtrodden and working poor. Thus the U.S. national security state was instrumental in the overthrow of popular reformist leaders such as Arbenz in Guatemala, Jagan in Guyana, Mossadegh in Iran, Bosch in the Dominican Republic, Sukarno in Indonesia, Goulart in Brazil, and Allende in Chile. And let us not forget how the United States assisted the militarists in overthrowing democratic governments in Greece, Uruguay, Bolivia, Pakistan, Thailand, and Turkey. Given this record, it is hard to believe that the CIA trained, armed, and financed an expeditionary force of Somocista thugs and mercenaries out of a newly acquired concern for Western-style electoral politics in Nicaragua.

In defense of the undemocratic way U.S. leaders go about "saving democracy," our policy makers offer this kind of sophistry: "We cannot always pick and choose our allies. Sometimes we must support unsavory right-wing authoritarian regimes in order to prevent the spread of far more repressive totalitarian communist ones." But surely, the degree of repression cannot be the criterion guiding White House policy, for the United

States has supported some of the worst butchers in the world: Batista in Cuba, Somoza in Nicaragua, the Shah in Iran, Salazar in Portugal, Marcos in the Philippines, Pinochet in Chile, Zia in Pakistan, Evren in Turkey, and even Pol Pot in Cambodia. In the 1965 Indonesian coup, the military slaughtered 500,000 people, according to the Indonesian chief of security (New York Times, 12/21/77; some estimates run twice as high), but this did not deter U.S. leaders from assisting in that takeover or from maintaining cozy relations with the same Jakarta regime that subsequently perpetuated a campaign of repression and mass extermination in East Timor.

U.S. leaders and the business-owned mainstream press describe "Marxist rebels" in countries like El Salvador as motivated by a lust for conquest. Our leaders would have us believe that revolutionaries do not seek power in order to eliminate hunger; they simply hunger for power. But even if this were true, why would that be cause for opposing them? Washington policy makers have never been bothered by the power appetites of the "moderate" right-wing authoritarian executionists, torturers, and militarists.

In any case, it is not true that leftist governments are more repressive than fascist ones. The political repression under the Sandinistas in Nicaragua was far less than what went on under Somoza. The political repression in Castro's Cuba is mild compared to the butchery perpetrated by the free-market Batista regime. And the revolutionary government in Angola treats its people much more gently than did the Portuguese colonizers.

Furthermore, in a number of countries successful social revolutionary movements have brought a net increase in individual freedom and well-being by advancing the conditions for health and human life, by providing jobs and education for the unemployed and illiterate, by using economic resources for social development rather than for corporate profit, and by overthrowing brutal reactionary regimes, ending foreign exploitation, and involving large sectors of the populace in the task of rebuilding their countries. Revolutions can extend a number of real freedoms without destroying those freedoms that never existed under prior reactionary regimes.

Who Threatens Whom?

Our policy makers also argue that right-wing governments, for all their deficiencies, are friendly toward the United States, while communist ones are belligerent and therefore a threat to U.S. security. But, in truth, every Marxist or left-leaning country, from a great power like the Soviet Union to a small power like Vietnam or Nicaragua to a minipower like Grenada under the New Jewel Movement, sought friendly diplomatic and economic relations with the United States. These governments did so not necessarily out of love and affection for the United States, but because of something firmer-their own self-interest. As they themselves admitted, their economic development and political security would have been much better served if they could have enjoyed good relations with Washington.

If U.S. Ieaders justify their hostility toward leftist governments on the grounds that such nations are hostile toward us, what becomes the justification when these countries try to be friendly? When a newly established revolutionary or otherwise dissident regime threatens U.S. hegemonic globalists with friendly relations, this does pose a problem. The solution is to (1) launch a well-orchestrated campaign of disinformation that heaps criticism on the new government for imprisoning the butchers, assassins, and torturers of

the old regime and for failing to institute Western electoral party politics; (2) denounce the new government as a threat to our peace and security; (3) harass and destabilize it and impose economic sanctions; and (4) attack it with counterrevolutionary surrogate forces or, if necessary, U.S. troops. Long before the invasion, the targeted country responds with angry denunciations of U.S. policy. It moves closer to other "outlawed" nations and attempts to build up its military defenses in anticipation of a U.S.-sponsored attack. These moves are eagerly seized upon by U.S. officials and media as evidence of the other country's antagonism toward the United States, and as justification for the policies that evoked such responses.

Yet it is difficult to demonstrate that small countries like Grenada and Nicaragua are a threat to U.S. security. We remember the cry of the hawk during the Vietnam war: "If we don't fight the Vietcong in the jungles of Indochina, we will have to fight them on the beaches of California." The image of the Vietnamese getting into their PT boats and crossing the Pacific to invade California was, as Walter Lippmann noted at the time, a grievous insult to the U.S. Navy. The image of a tiny ill-equipped Nicaraguan army driving up through Mexico and across the Rio Grande in order to lay waste to our land is equally ludicrous. The truth is, the Vietnamese, Cubans, Grenadians, and Nicaraguans have never invaded the United States; it is the United States that has invaded Vietnam, Cuba, Grenada, and Nicaragua, and it is our government that continues to try to isolate, destabilize, and in other ways threaten any country that tries to drop out of the global capitalist system or even assert an economic nationalism within it.

Remember the Red Menace

For many decades of cold war, when all other arguments failed, there was always the Russian bear. According to our cold warriors, small leftist countries and insurgencies threatened our security because they were extensions of Soviet power. Behind the little Reds there supposedly stood the Giant Red Menace. Evidence to support this global menace thesis was sometimes farfetched. President Carter and National Security Advisor Brezinski suddenly discovered a "Soviet combat brigade" in Cuba in 1979- which turned out to be a noncombat unit that had been there since 1962. This did not stop President Reagan from announcing to a joint session of Congress several years later: "Cuba is host to a Soviet combat brigade...."

In 1983, in a nationally televised speech, Reagan pointed to satellite photos that revealed the menace of three Soviet helicopters in Nicaragua. Sandinista officials subsequently noted that the helicopters could be seen by anyone arriving at Managua airport and, in any case, posed no military threat to the United States. Equally ingenious was the way Reagan transformed a Grenadian airport, built to accommodate direct tourist flights, into a killer-attack Soviet forward base, and a twenty-foot-deep Grenadian inlet into a potential Soviet submarine base.

In 1967 Secretary of State Dean Rusk argued that U.S. national security was at stake in Vietnam because the Vietnamese were puppets of "Red China" and if China won in Vietnam, it would overrun all of Asia and this supposedly would be the beginning of the end for all of us. Later we were told that the Salvadoran rebels were puppets of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua who were puppets of the Cubans who were puppets of the Russians. In truth, there was no evidence that Third World peoples took up arms and embarked upon costly revolutionary struggles because some sinister ringmaster in Moscow or Peking cracked the whip. Revolutions are not push-button affairs; rather, they

evolve only if there exits a reservoir of hope and grievance that can be galvanized into popular action. Revolutions are made when large segments of the population take courage from each other and stand up to an insufferable social order. People are inclined to endure great abuses before risking their lives in confrontations with vastly superior armed forces. There is no such thing as a frivolous revolution, or a revolution initiated and orchestrated by a manipulative cabal residing in a foreign capital.

Nor is there evidence that once the revolution succeeded, the new leaders placed the interests of their country at the disposal of Peking or Moscow. Instead of becoming the willing puppets of "Red China," as our policy makers predicted, Vietnam found itself locked in combat with its neighbor to the north. And, as noted earlier, almost every Third World revolutionary country has tried to keep its options open and has sought friendly diplomatic and economic relations with the United States.

Why then do U.S. Ieaders intervene in every region and almost every nation in the world, either overtly with U.S. military force or covertly with surrogate mercenary forces, death squads, aid, bribes, manipulated media, and rigged elections? Is all this intervention just an outgrowth of a deeply conditioned anticommunist ideology? Are U.S. Ieaders responding to the public's longstanding phobia about the Red Menace? Certainly many Americans are anticommunist, but this sentiment does not translate into a demand for overseas interventionism. Quite the contrary. Opinion polls over the last half-century have shown repeatedly that the U.S. public is not usually supportive of com mitting U.S. forces in overseas engagements and prefers friendly relations with other nations, including communist ones. Far from galvanizing our leaders into interventionist actions, popular opinion has been one of the few restraining influences.

There is no denying, however, that opinion can sometimes be successfully manipulated by jingoist ventures. The invasion of Grenada and the slaughter perpetrated against Iraq are cases in point. The quick, easy, low-cost wins reaffirmed for some Americans the feeling that we were not weak and indecisive, not sitting ducks to some foreign prey. But even in these cases, it took an intensive and sustained propaganda barrage of half-truths and lies by the national security state and its faithful lackeys in the national media to muster some public support for military actions against Grenada and Iraq.

In sum, various leftist states do not pose a military threat to U.S. security; instead, they want to trade and live in peace with us, and are much less abusive and more helpful toward their people than the reactionary regimes they replaced. In addition, U.S. Ieaders have shown little concern for freedom in the Third World and have helped subvert democracy in a number of nations. And popular opinion generally opposes interventionism by lopsided majorities. What then motivates U.S. policy and how can we think it is not confused and contradictory?

The answer is that Marxist and other leftist or revolutionary states do pose a real threat, not to the United States as a national entity and not to the American people as such, but to the corporate and financial interests of our country, to Exxon and Mobil, Chase Manhattan and First National, Ford and General Motors, Anaconda and U.S. Steel, and to capitalism as a world system.

The problem is not that revolutionaries accumulate power but that they use power to pursue substantive policies that are unacceptable to U.S. ruling circles. What bothers our political leaders (and generals, investment bankers, and corporate heads) is not the

supposed lack of political democracy in these countries but their attempts to construct economic democracy, to depart from the impoverishing rigors of the international free market, to use capital and labor in a way that is inimical to the interests of multinational corporatism.

A New York Times editorial (3/30183) referred to "the undesirable and offensive Managua regime" and the danger of seeing "Marxist power ensconced in Managua." But what specifically is so dangerous about "Marxist power ?" What was undesirable and offensive about the Sandinista government in Managua? What did it do to us? What did it do to its own people? Was it the literacy campaign? The health care and housing programs? The land reform and development of farm cooperatives? The attempt at rebuilding Managua, at increasing production or achieving a more equitable distribution of taxes, services, and food? In large part, yes. Such reforms, even if not openly denounced by our government, do make a country suspect because they are symptomatic of an effort to erect a new and competing economic order in which the prerogatives of wealth and corporate investment are no longer secure, and the land, labor, and resources are no longer used primarily for the accumulation of corporate profits.

U.S. Ieaders and the corporate-owned press would have us believe they opposed revolutionary governments because the latter do not have an opposition press or have not thrown their country open to Western style (and Western-financed) elections. U.S. Ieaders come closer to their true complaint when they condemn such governments for interfering with the prerogatives of the "free market." Similarly, Henry Kissinger came close to the truth when he defended the fascist overthrow of the democratic government in Chile by noting that when obliged to choose between saving the economy or saving democracy, we must save the economy. Had Kissinger said, we must save the capitalist economy, it would have been the whole truth. For under Allende, the danger was not that the economy was collapsing (although the U.S. was doing its utmost to destabilize it); the real threat was that the economy was moving away from free-market capitalism and toward a more equitable social democracy, albeit in limited ways.

U.S. officials say they are for change just as long as it is peaceful and not violently imposed. Indeed, economic elites may some times tolerate very limited reforms, learning to give a little in order to keep a lot. But judging from Chile, Guatemala, Indonesia, and a number of other places, they have a low tolerance for changes, even peaceful ones, that tamper with the existing class structure and threaten the prerogatives of corporate and landed wealth.

To the rich and powerful it makes little difference if their interests are undone by a peaceful transformation rather than a violent upheaval. The means concern them much less than the end results. It is not the "violent" in violent revolution they hate; it is the "revolution." (Third World elites seldom perish in revolutions. The worst of them usually manage to make it to Miami, Madrid, Paris, or New York.) They dread socialism the way the rest of us might dread poverty and hunger. So, when push comes to shove, the wealthy classes of Third World countries, with a great deal of help from the corporate-military-political elites in our country, will use fascism to preserve capitalism while claiming they are saving democracy from communism.

A socialist Cuba or a socialist North Korea, as such, are not a threat to the survival of world capitalism. The danger is not socialism in any one country but a socialism that might spread to many countries. Multinational corporations, as their name implies, need

the entire world, or a very large part of it, to exploit and to invest and expand in. There can be no such thing as "capitalism in one country." The domino theory-the view that if one country falls to the revolutionaries, others will follow in quick succession-may not work as automatically as its more fearful proponents claim, but there usually is a contagion, a power of example and inspiration, and sometimes even direct encouragement and assistance from one revolution to another.

Support the Good Guys?

If revolutions arise from the sincere aspirations of the populace, then it is time the United States identify itself with these aspi rations, so liberal critics keep urging. They ask: "Why do we always find ourselves on the wrong side in the Third World? Why are we always on the side of the oppressor?" Too bad the question is treated as a rhetorical one, for it is deserving of a response. The answer is that right-wing oppressors, however heinous they be, do not tamper with, and give full support to, private investment and profit, while the leftists pose a challenge to that system.

There are those who used to say that we had to learn from the communists, copy their techniques, and thus win the battle for the hearts and minds of the people. Can we imagine the ruling interests of the United States abiding by this? The goal is not to copy communist reforms but to prevent them. How would U.S. interventionists try to learn from and outdo the revolutionaries? Drive out the latifundio owners and sweatshop bosses? Kick out the plundering corporations and nationalize their holdings? Imprison the militarists and torturers? Redistribute the land, use capital investment for home consumption or hard currency exchange instead of cash crop exports that profit a rich few? Install a national health insurance program and construct hospitals and clinics at public expense? Mobilize the population for literacy campaigns and for work in publicly owned enterprises? If U.S. rulers did all this, they would have done more than defeat the communists and other revolutionaries, they would have carried out the communists' programs. They would have prevented revolution only by bringing about its effects-thereby defeating their own goals.

U.S. policy makers say they cannot afford to pick and choose the governments they support, but that is exactly what they do. And the pattern of choice is consistent through each successive administration regardless of the party or personality in office. U.S. Ieaders support those governments, be they autocratic or democratic in form, that are friendly toward capitalism and oppose those governments, be they autocratic or democratic, that seek to develop a noncapitalist social order.

Occasionally friendly relations are cultivated with noncapitalist nations like China if these countries show themselves in useful opposition to other socialist nations and are sufficiently open to private capital exploitation. In the case of China, the economic opportunity is so huge as to be hard to resist, the labor supply is plentiful and cheap, and the profit opportunities are great.

In any one instance, interventionist policies may be less concerned with specific investments than with protecting the global investment system. The United States had relatively little direct investment in Cuba, Vietnam, and Grenada-to mention three countries that Washington has invaded in recent years. What was at stake in Grenada, as Reagan said, was something more than nutmeg. It was whether we would let a country develop a competing economic order, a different way of utilizing its land, labor, capital,

and natural resources. A social revolution in any part of the world may or may not hurt specific U.S. corporations, but it nevertheless becomes part of a cumulative threat to private finance capital in general.

The United States will support governments that seek to suppress guerrilla movements, as in El Salvador, and will support guerrilla movements that seek to overthrow governments, as in Nicaragua. But there is no confusion or stupidity about it. It is incorrect to say, "We have no foreign policy" or "We have a stupid and confused foreign policy." Again, it is necessary not to confuse subterfuge with stupidity. The policy is remarkably rational. Its central organizing principle is to make the world safe for the multinational corporations and the free-market capital-accumulation system. However, our rulers cannot ask the U.S. public to sacrifice their tax dollars and the lives of their sons for Exxon and Chase Manhattan, for the profit system as such, so they tell us that the interventions are for freedom and national security and the protection of unspecified "U.S. interests."

Whether policy makers believe their own arguments is not the key question. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. Sometimes presidents Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Bill Clinton were doing their hypocritical best when their voices quavered with staged compassion for this or that oppressed people who had to be rescued from the communists or terrorists with U.S. missiles and troops, and sometimes they were sincere, as when they spoke of their fear and loathing of communism and revolution and their desire to protect U.S. investments abroad. We need not ponder the question of whether our leaders are motivated by their class interests or by a commitment to anti-communist ideology, as if these two things were in competition with each other instead of mutually reinforcing. The arguments our leaders proffer may be self-serving and fabricated, yet also sincerely embraced. It is a creed's congruity with one's material self-interest that often makes it so compelling.

In any case, so much of politics is the rational use of irrational symbols. The arguments in support of interventionism may sound and may actually be irrational and nonsensical, but they serve a rational purpose. Once we grasp the central consistency of U.S. foreign policy, we can move from a liberal complaint to a radical analysis, from criticizing the "foolishness" of our government's behavior to understanding why the "foolishness" is not random but persists over time against all contrary arguments and evidence, always moving in the same elitist, repressive direction.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and other Eastern European communist governments, U.S. Ieaders now have a freer hand in their interventions. A number of left reformist governments that had relied on the Soviets for economic assistance and political protection against U.S. interference now have nowhere to turn. The willingness of U.S. Ieaders to tolerate economic deviations does not grow with their sense of their growing power. Quite the contrary. Now even the palest economic nationalism, as displayed in Iraq by Saddam Hussein over oil prices, invites the destructive might of the U.S. military. The goal now, as always, is to obliterate every trace of an alternative system, to make it clear that there is no road to take except that of the free market, in a world in which the many at home and abroad will work still harder for less so that the favored few will accumulate more and more wealth.

That is the vision of the future to which most U.S. Ieaders are implicitly dedicated. It is a vision taken from the past and never forgotten by them, a matter of putting the masses of

people at home and abroad back in their place, divested of any aspirations for a better world because they are struggling too hard to survive in this one.

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